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Fish Advisory Expanded For Roanoke River Stretch

(Richmond, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health is adding three species of fish to its advisory for eating certain fish taken from a 50-mile stretch of the Roanoke River because recent fish samples contain concentrations of PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, above a level of caution.

Smallmouth bass, channel catfish and flathead catfish now join the list of fish contained in a health advisory issued in July 1998 for a section of the Roanoke River known locally as the Staunton River in Southside Virginia. The 50-mile section extends from Seneca Creek at Route 704 near Long Island downstream to the point where a pipeline intersects Route 803 in Halifax County and where Route 633 in Charlotte County crosses the Roanoke, which is approximately 5.4 miles below the Route 360 bridge. Advisory signs are posted along the river in that area.

The fish have been added to the advisory following results from recent fish samples collected by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) which show that PCBs exceed the level of caution. Smallmouth bass and channel catfish were not part of the 1998 advisory because initial fish samples showed that PCB levels were below 600 parts per billion (ppb). DEQ did not sample flathead catfish prior to the 1998 advisory.

The 1998 health advisory was issued after the initial DEQ sampling revealed PCB levels above 600 ppb in striped bass, white bass and carp.

"The health department advises that people should eat no more than two eight-ounce meals per month of these fish species from this section of the river," said Khizar Wasti, Ph.D., Director of the Division of Health Hazards Control. "The meal estimates are based on the possibility that eating PCB-contaminated fish may increase the risk of cancer in humans," he said. The health department also cautions against consuming too many large channel catfish caught near Altavista, Wasti said, since one sample of large channel catfish showed PCBs just above the level of caution. Other species sampled from Altavista had PCBs below the level of caution.

The potential for PCBs to cause cancer in humans is based on studies in experimental animals. A link between occupational exposure to PCBs and cancer in humans has not been proven.

PCBs are a group of man-made industrial chemicals that exist as a mixture and may contain up to 209 individual compounds. Since 1977, PCBs have not been produced in the U.S., but they are still found in the environment. PCBs were once widely used as coolants and lubricants in transformers, capacitors and other electrical equipment.

No specific PCB contamination source has been identified that can account for the elevated levels of PCBs in fish in the Roanoke River Basin.

Additional results on fish samples taken from the river are pending, according to Wasti. "The health department will continue to review results and will advise the public when needed," he said.

The health department recommends the following precautions, Wasti said, to reduce any potential harmful effects:

- Eat the smaller, younger fish (within the legal limits). They are less likely to contain harmful levels of PCBs than larger, older fish.
- Remove the skin, fat (from the belly and top of the fish) and internal organs where PCBs are most likely to accumulate before cooking the fish
- Bake, broil or grill on an open rack to allow fats to drain away from the meat.
- Discard the fats that cook out of the fish.
- Avoid or reduce the amount of fish drippings or broth that are Iused to flavor the meal. These drippings may contain higher levels of PCBs.
- Eat less deep fried fish, since frying seals PCBs into the fatty tissue.

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